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Review of methods of work of the Commission for Social Development

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report responds to General Assembly resolution 57/270 B, in which the Assembly requested each functional commission to examine its methods of work in order to better pursue implementation of the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits on the basis of a report with recommendations to be submitted by the Secretary-General to each functional commission. The report reviews the methods of work of the Commission for Social Development and examines the progress it has achieved thus far to improve its methods of work to enable it to better adapt to changing circumstances and mandates. The report concludes with a number of recommendations for further improving the methods of work of the Commission.

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I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 46 of its resolution 57/270 B, the General Assembly requested each functional commission to examine its methods of work in order to better pursue the implementation of the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits, recognizing that there was no need for a uniform approach since each functional commission had its own specificity, on the basis of a report with recommendations to be submitted by the Secretary-General to each functional commission, and stipulating that the functional commissions and other relevant bodies of the Economic and Social Council should report to the Council no later than 2005 on the outcome of that examination. The present report has been prepared in response to that request.

II. Mandates and terms of reference of the Commission

2. The Commission for Social Development, originally the Social Commission, was established by the Economic and Social Council in 1946. The functions of the Commission, as set out in its original mandate contained in Council resolution 10 (II) of 21 June 1946, were to advise the Council on social questions of a general character, practical measures needed in the social field and international agreements and conventions on any of those matters and on their execution, as well as to report to the Council on the extent to which the recommendations of the United Nations in the field of social policy were being carried out.

3. Following a comprehensive reappraisal of the role of the Commission in 1961, the terms of reference of the Commission were expanded by Economic and Social Council resolution 830 J (XXXII) of 2 August 1961 to cover advice to the Council in the fields of broad social policy development, research in areas affecting social and economic development and policies and programmes designed to promote social progress. In its resolution 1139 (XLI) of 29 July 1966, the Council mandated the Commission with providing advice on social problems that required action or recommendations either by the Council itself or by the General Assembly. At that time, the Commission was renamed the Commission for Social Development in order to clarify its role as a preparatory and advisory body of the Council on the whole range of social development policies. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights was adopted by the General Assembly in the same year.

III. Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly

4. In 1996, in the wake of the World Summit for Social Development, which was held in Copenhagen in 1995, the terms of reference of the Commission for Social Development were further expanded to enable it to assume its role as the primary intergovernmental body responsible for the follow-up to the Summit. In its resolution 50/161 of 22 December 1995 on implementation of the outcome of the Summit, the General Assembly decided that a revitalized Commission for Social Development, together with the Economic and Social Council and the Assembly itself, should constitute a three-tiered intergovernmental follow-up process. The

Commission was charged with the primary responsibility for the follow-up to and review of the implementation of the Summit, the Council was to provide overall guidance and coordination and the Assembly would have a role in policy formulation.

5. By its resolution 1996/7 of 22 July 1996, the Economic and Social Council reaffirmed that the follow-up to the world Summit for Social Development should be undertaken on the basis of an integrated approach to social development and within the framework of a coordinated follow-up to and implementation of the results of the major international conferences in the economic, social and related fields and reiterated that the Commission shall have the primary responsibility for the follow-up to and review of the implementation of the Summit. While reaffirming the existing mandate of the Commission, the Council decided that the Commission, in assisting the Council in monitoring, reviewing and appraising the progress achieved and problems encountered in the implementation of the outcome of the Summit, should:

(a) Improve international understanding on social development through, inter alia, the exchange of information and experience;

(b) Integrate, within the framework of the follow-up to the Summit, consideration of issues relating to the situation of social groups, including review of relevant United Nations programmes of action related to such groups, and consideration of other sectoral issues;

(c) Identify emerging issues affecting social development that require urgent consideration, and make substantive recommendations thereon;

(d) Make recommendations regarding social development to the Council;

(e) Elaborate practical measures aimed at furthering Summit recommendations;

(f) Identify issues requiring improved system-wide coordination, taking into account substantive inputs from different organizations of the United Nations system, as well as the contribution of other functional commissions concerned, in order to assist the Council in its coordination functions;

(g) Maintain and enhance public awareness and support for the implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration and the Programme of Action of the Summit.

6. In order for the Commission to fulfil these mandates more effectively, the Economic and Social Council also decided to expand its membership from 32 to 46, to annualize its sessions beginning in 1997 and to increase the duration of its sessions from five to eight working days. It should be noted that between 1961 and 1969, the Commission met annually.

7. In addition, in resolution 1996/7, the Economic and Social Council, taking into account its resolution 1995/60 of 28 July 1995, in which it had decided that the Commission should, inter alia, develop a multi-year programme of work to the year 2000, selecting specific themes and addressing them from an interrelated and integrated perspective, adopted a new structure for the Commission's agenda and work programme, which consisted of the following:

(a) Consideration of subjects identified in the multi-year programme of work, including the situation of social groups;

(b) Review of relevant United Nations plans and programmes of action pertaining to the situation of social groups, as necessary;

(c) Emerging issues, trends and new approaches to issues affecting social development, as necessary.

8. The primary role of the Commission for Social Development in the implementation of the outcome of the Summit was reaffirmed following the five-year review in 2000. At its twenty-fourth special session, the General Assembly requested that the Economic and Social Council regularly assess, through the Commission, the implementation of the Copenhagen commitments and the further initiatives for social development adopted at the special session.

IV. Methods of work of the Commission

9. At various times, the Commission has shown awareness of the need to improve its methods of work to adapt to changing circumstances and mandates.

10. At its fortieth session, in February 2002, the Commission, with a view to improving its methods of work, recommended that the Economic and Social Council adopt a decision by which elections of its new Chairman and other members of the Bureau would be held immediately following the closure of the Commission's regular session, rather than at the beginning. This has ensured continuity and enabled the same Bureau to steer the entire preparatory process, including the pre-session and in-session work of the Commission.

11. In paragraph 47 of resolution 57/270 B, the General Assembly underscored that the functional commissions, when mandated, should continue to have the primary responsibility for the review and assessment of progress made in implementing United Nations conference documents, while taking on a new focus on their methods of work.

12. In response to that request, the Bureau of the Commission is making the following proposals to improve the work of its forty-second session in February 2004:

(a) In order to effectively utilize the time allotted (eight working days) and also to ensure that the Commission benefits from devoting more of its time to the holding of meaningful discussions on questions related to social policy, the convening of three panel discussions has been scheduled during the forty-second session of the Commission. It is recognized that the active participation of experts in the field of social development in the work of the Commission would enhance the quality of the deliberations and the sharing of experiences on the substantive issues on the agenda. In addition, interaction with representatives of non-governmental organizations and civil society is encouraged, through these panel discussions, aiming at generating meaningful dialogues between them and Government representatives;

(b) The role of the Commission in identifying emerging issues affecting social development that require urgent consideration and making substantive recommendations thereon is of major relevance to its effectiveness (see Council

resolution 1996/7). In addition, recalling the Council's above-mentioned decision on the new structure of the Commission's agenda (see para. 7 above), the Bureau of the Commission has proposed the inclusion in the agenda of its forty-second and future sessions of an item entitled "Emerging issues affecting social development". In the context of its existing multi-year programme, which runs through 2006, even if the Commission should choose to adopt a biennial programme of work, this additional item would provide the Commission with some flexibility;

(c) The Bureau has also proposed that the Commission consider the issue of international migration and migrants from a social perspective under this new agenda item, since the issue of international migration, which involves a significant number of people, is acquiring increasing visibility and economic, social and political importance in a large number of countries, whether they be countries of origin, destination or transit. It is proposed that the Commission consider this topic from the viewpoint of the well-being of migrants and the social dimensions of international migration.

V. Recommendations

13. The following recommendations are put forward for consideration by the Economic and Social Council through the Commission for Social Development:

(a) With regard to the nature of the outcomes on its priority themes, the Commission would strive for more focused outcomes, containing new elements and valuable policy recommendations, the consideration of which could take place in the General Assembly, through the Council;

(b) With regard to its multiyear programme of work, which currently covers a five-year period through 2006, the Commission may wish to review the possibility of adopting a biennial programme of work, in which case there would remain the need for an integrated treatment of the various items in the future agendas of the Commission, including those related to the situation of social groups, in accordance with the decision of the Council, mentioned in paragraph 5 (b) above;

(c) In accordance with paragraph 48 of resolution 57/270 B, in which the Assembly invited the functional commissions to consider, in their deliberations, the experience gained and lessons learned by the United Nations funds and programmes in the implementation of the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits, the Commission may wish to encourage and seek more active participation and involvement in its work by the funds and programmes, including other entities of the United Nations system and the Bretton Woods institutions;

(d) Pursuant to paragraph 52 of resolution 57/270 B, in which the Assembly invited the United Nations regional commissions to contribute to the review of progress made in the implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits, the Commission may wish to request the regional commissions to participate actively in the preparation of the review of further implementation of the World Summit for Social Development and the outcome of the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly in 2005;

(e) In its follow-up to and implementation of the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly and other major United Nations conferences and summits the Commission may wish to find ways and means to link its work with that of the other functional commissions of the Council, for example, through cooperation and coordination between the various substantive secretariats and bureaux;

(f) In the light of resolution 57/270 B, in which the Assembly also recognized that the United Nations conferences and summits play a crucial role in raising awareness, mobilizing political will and public opinion, engaging civil society and the private sector and for taking stock of the implementation of the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits by all relevant stakeholders at all levels, the Commission may wish to further encourage and facilitate the active and meaningful participation of all actors in the social development domain of its work, in particular when it considers its priority theme in 2005;

(g) In its work, and particularly in its review of 2005, the Commission may wish to focus on important measures for the further implementation of its programme of action, as well as new challenges and emerging issues, in accordance with paragraph 71 of resolution 57/270 B, and to continue to identify means to be a more effective forum for fostering cooperation, partnerships and solidarity in the pursuit of social development and social progress;

(h) Finally, the Commission may wish to consider how it can contribute to the "major event" in 2005 as proposed in paragraph 75 of resolution 57/270 B.